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Gregory Chad Wilkes
Georgia Gwinnett College, gwilkes@ggc.edu

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Star Wars: The Last Jedi

Abstract

This is a film review of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) directed by Rian Johnson.

The *Star Wars* franchise was birthed by writer and director George Lucas with *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), and it has proven to have astonishing staying power. In a ninth installment, entitled *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (dir. Rian Johnson, 2017), fans continue to explore the elusive nature of ‘the Force,’ along with its manifestations in the cosmic and political worlds.

The Force is loosely derived from the Chinese notion of the *Tao* (the Way), and it consists of a set of metaphysical oppositions which permit, whether through harmony or tension, all things, including all life, to exist. In the *Star Wars* universe, certain Force-sensitive persons can manipulate the subtle unfoldings of the Force, which has given rise to two primary orientations to the Force, which are deemed to be Force-centered religions. First are the servants of the ‘Light’ Side of the Force known as ‘Jedi.’ They use their Force-powers to protect and to defend by emphasizing cooperation and natural harmony, or balance. Second are the servants of the ‘Dark’ Side of the Force, known as the ‘Sith.’ They use the Force to dominate others, often by employing deception and seeking powerful super-weapons. Without remorse, the Sith do not hesitate to threaten and to kill in the service of an ever more competitive quest for personal supremacy. It has been part of the genius of the *Star Wars* extended universe that essentially the same set of basic Force-powers and concepts can be put to drastically different ends, so that neither the Light Side nor the Dark Side ever gains an absolute upper hand. But, things are looking dire for the heroes of *The Last Jedi*. The last and most powerful of all surviving Jedi, Luke Skywalker [Mark Hamill], has disappeared and has, apparently, abandoned the galaxy to a dark future.

The plot of *The Last Jedi* takes a familiar form: the galaxy is again threatened by political tyranny led by a pair of powerful Sith. Supreme Leader Snoke has taken the powerful force-wielder, Kylo Ren [Adam Driver], as an apprentice, and together they have reassembled the remnants of the Galactic Empire, complete with new super-weapons and an especially powerful

propaganda machine. Again, a rag-tag resistance movement has formed, led by none other than General Leah Organa [the late Carrie Fisher]. In fact, Kylo Ren is the son of Leah and famed anti-hero, Han Solo [Harrison Ford]. Realizing the dire nature of this fight, General Leah recruits Rey [Daisy Ridley], who is herself an untrained force-wielder, to try to locate Luke. After assembling a secret map, Rey is able to locate the Jedi Master, who has sought and found anonymity at the location of the galaxy's first Jedi Temple. Luke, however, has cut himself off from the Force and seems eager to die, letting the old teachings of the diminished Jedi order perish with him. Rey, of course, has other plans and is eager to recruit the old Jedi Master to the Rebel cause: she also asks him to train her in the tenets of Jedi lore and practice. Initially, Luke is unwilling to take another Force-trainee, because he is riddled with guilt for having unsuccessfully trained Kylo Ren, the very Sith menace who has thrown the galaxy into heartless chaos.

Alternatively, Supreme Leader Snoke sees a double-opportunity. If Rey can be converted to the Dark Side, perhaps the secret location of Luke's exile can finally come to light and his failure to maintain the Jedi Order will be complete. The Sith will kill him and once again rule the galaxy without rival or opposition. Snoke uses his own powers with the Force to facilitate a telepathic link between Kylo Ren and Rey. For the film's audience, their telepathic communications, along with Rey's interactions with Luke Skywalker, become a medium to explore the boundaries and temptations implied in each 'side' of the Force. In fact, the thin plot is somewhat ameliorated by this film's especial felicity in explicating the nature of the Force. For eager fans, there are some fascinating glimpses into its lore and mystery. Scholars of religion may recognize many of these revelations as suffused with Taoist and Buddhist insights ranging from the metaphysical to the epistemological. It is well-known that Eastern philosophies permeate the *Star Wars* universe and extended universe, but *The Last Jedi* is especially amenable to a Buddhist lens of interpretation.

Furthermore, three Buddhist frames are especially critical for unpacking the religious content and message of *The Last Jedi*.

The first of these Buddhist frames is an exploration of the blinding nature of unexamined vices. This film intensely examines the way that personal egoisms must be overcome so that one is not left vulnerable to some blinding vice. The three cardinal faults of Buddhism, namely greed, hatred, and delusion, seem to come into focus in the moral struggles faced by each of the major Force-wielders. First, for example, Rey must battle the sense of abandonment she feels at her parents' desertion of her and her apparently modest and unknown pedigree. She clings possessively to virtually every parental figure she encounters, like Han Solo, Leia Organa, and Luke Skywalker, and she cannot see the unrealistic expectation she greedily places upon each to compensate for her anemic self-worth. Though thoroughly subtle and forgivable, the vice leaves her vulnerable, since she fails to foresee that her attempt to make a sibling of Kylo Ren is mere bait laid out for her by Supreme Leader Snoke. Her impossible expectations are a form of unbridled greed, until the manipulation is exploited by Kylo Ren to tempt her to the Dark Side of the Force. A second example exploring the blinding character of vice appears when Kylo Ren must face the radical loneliness implied in his cosmic philosophy of competitive personal power. Such blinding hatred caused him to strike dead his own father. While in one critical scene he hesitates to kill his mother, Leia, he is nonetheless consumed by loneliness and hate. Desperate to connect and intrigued by the Force-connection with Rey, he harbors the secret hope that Rey will side with him in a coup against Supreme Leader Snoke, whom he secretly despises. In a fantasy of personal ambition, Kylo Ren hopes he and Rey will rule instead, perhaps having overcome the isolation his hatreds have engendered. Third, Luke Skywalker is so crippled by a fear of failure that he cuts himself off from the Force rather than participate further in Jedi activities that can be

corrupted. Thusly limited, he lives without purpose, waiting to die as the galaxy suffers hopelessly. As master Yoda later comments, his focus upon past and future failures blinds him from seeing the need in the here and now. He is veritably gripped in a delusion that leaves the galaxy without the spark of hope he might represent to others as a vaunted Jedi. In these three examples, the Buddha's interests in the conquering of blinding vices, like greed, hatred, and delusion, are made transparent to the film's audience.

The second of these Buddhist frames is an exploration of cause and effect, vaguely reminiscent of the Buddha's teaching on the chain of 'dependent causation.' Without a careful analysis, our heroes fail to recognize the distinctions between perception, illusion, and reality. If these are not properly discerned, truth is again shrouded by yet another kind of blind egoism and ignorance. The critical scene associated with this theme occurs when Rey is training with Luke Skywalker at the first Jedi Temple. It is a beacon of the light side of the Force, but deep underground is a wellspring of the Dark Side. Luke is frightened to learn that Rey feels pulled to the Dark Side wellspring, just as Kylo Ren had been. Rey eventually explores the wellspring without Luke and a number of additional secrets of the Force are revealed to her. She asks the Dark wellspring of the Force, almost prayerfully, to reveal to her the identity of her parents. In response, she finds that she is confronted with a Force-vision that is extraordinarily reminiscent of the famous Buddhist parable of Indra's Net, which imagines every point-instant of space-time to be a reflective bead reflecting every other bead in the net. She sees a long, perhaps infinite, trail of duplicates of herself that appear to be separated from herself by only a small moment of time. As she gestures and snaps her fingers, the duplicates mirror her actions exactly, but with a small temporal delay. Eventually, the trail of mirror images seem to circle back around to the original, so that she realizes her actions actually form patterns in the cascade of mirror images, eventually

collapsing the distinction between original cause and consequent effect. She also comes to believe that if she allows her consciousness to follow the trail of copies, the question of the identity of her parents will be shown to her, but just as the mirror clears to reveal their faces, she seems to see only herself reflected in the glass. Or, perhaps she sees a mere glimpse of her own wishes, but little more. Her own desperate attachment in this quest for knowledge seems to have blinded her to the answer, and more significantly, it may have somehow revealed the answers regarding her lineage to her most dangerous enemy, Kylo Ren, in his own Force-vision from the Dark Side. Unable to let go of her desperate desire to have a significant lineage and loving parents, her enemies are granted the very knowledge to manipulate her via their own feigned offers of significance and love. It is a powerful spiritual statement about the blinding power of egoistic attachments on the hero's quest, but it is rooted deeply in the analysis of causation which connects craving with feeling and perception. Furthermore, Rey's Force-vision sees the universe as a theater of cosmic, and karmic, patterns in endless repetition and variation, much as the Buddha suggests in the dharma of *dependent origination*.

The third religious theme evident in the film, and the one most self-consciously dependent on Buddhist teaching, is a reflection on the theme of impermanence, or *sunyata*. Feeling he has failed both Kylo Ren and Rey, Luke Skywalker achieves certainty that the experiments of the Jedi Order have utterly failed. He grabs a torch and prepares to burn down the Jedi Temple and incinerate the last of an ancient library of Jedi texts. With no temple, library, or remaining Jedi, the Order will be essentially extinct when he dies. As he approaches the temple with the torch, the silhouette of Master Yoda appears to him in the form of a Force-ghost. When Luke hesitates to initiate the burning, Yoda summons a lightning bolt from the sky and sets the temple aflame himself. When Luke tries to run inside to save the texts, his path is barred by an explosion of

flame. He turns to Yoda and asks, ‘So, it is time for the Jedi Order to end?’ and receives an affirmative response from the cackling Grand Master, who is a veritable laughing Buddha, indeed.

Luke laments his failures to Yoda, who reassures him that being a Jedi Master is never solely an exercise of passing on successes, strengths, and masteries. The failures must also be passed on, so that weaknesses are not allowed to fester unhindered, thereby weakening the Light. Master Yoda shows Luke that it is okay to admit that the Jedi Order has failed and that it can come to an end to allow for new forms and manifestations of the Light. Yoda notes that Rey already has everything she needs without the old books and stale practices. Remembering the impermanence of all forms, and consequently embracing novelty peacefully, are insights Luke uses against Kylo Ren in their final confrontation, since in this case, it is Ren’s stale pattern of tantrums and rages that is the weakness the Light Side of the Force exploits to keep the Rebellion alive.

Fans of *Star Wars* can easily enjoy the universe for its wonderful characters, plots, and turns. But deeper layers of reflection are always present, too. The Buddha’s teachings on blinding vices, dependent origination, and impermanence give *The Last Jedi* a richness of reflection many will enjoy.